

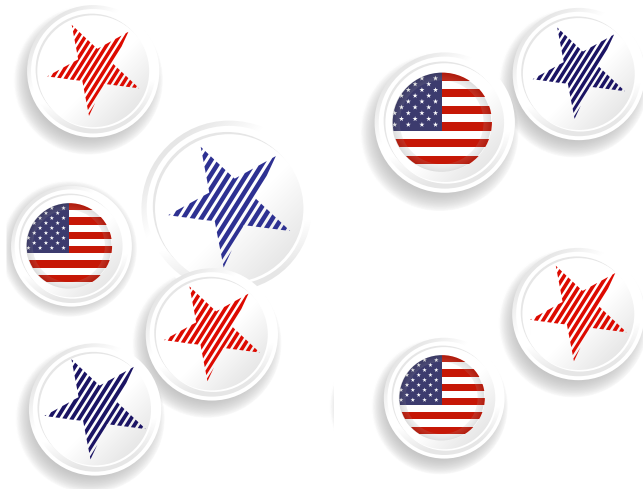


## Does the presidential candidate with the most votes always win?

Not always. In fact, there have been four presidential elections in which the winner did not receive a majority of the popular vote. The first of these was John Quincy Adams in the election of 1824, and the most recent occurred in 2000 in the presidential race between George W. Bush and Al Gore.

### How does this happen?

The answer lies in the “Electoral College.” The drafters of the U.S. Constitution sought to create a system that balanced the interests of the (then) 13 states and those of the American people. Voters chose the members of the House of Representatives, but state legislatures (also elected by the people) elected U.S. senators. And states sent delegates to a body—the Electoral College—that chose the president and vice president.



- THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE OFFICIALLY ELECTS THE PRESIDENT, BUT THE PEOPLE CHOOSE THE ELECTORAL COLLEGE MEMBERS.

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Americans later amended the Constitution to make the system more democratic. Beginning in 1913, U.S. senators were elected directly by the people. And while the Electoral College still officially elects the president, the people choose the Electoral College members.

Here’s how it works.

After the nationwide presidential election is held in November, the Electoral College meets in December. In most states, electors cast their votes based on how the majority of voters in their state voted. The electors vote in their states on December 15, and Congress officially counts the results in January.

Each state has a number of electors equal to the number of its members in the U.S. House of Representatives—determined by a census of the the state’s population, plus its two senators. The District of Columbia, which is not a state and has no voting representation in Congress, has three Electoral College votes.

There are 538 electors in the Electoral College; 270 electoral votes are needed to win the presidential election.

Most states award electoral votes on a winner-take-all basis. The presidential ticket that gets the most citizens’ votes receives all that state’s electoral votes.

Two states—Nebraska and Maine—have experimented with awarding their electoral votes proportionately based on citizens' votes. Presidential election strategy consists of “carrying” a combination of states that adds up to 270 electoral votes. Election results can turn on the electoral votes in a handful of competitive state races.

One consequence of the winner-take-all system is that a candidate can win the most votes nationally but lose the election.

Imagine that a candidate wins a state by a small margin and that state has a lot of electoral votes. That candidate would still receive all of the electoral votes. So if a candidate wins in California by a small margin, they get all 55 of California's electoral votes. That same candidate may lose in other, smaller states by large margins and receive fewer popular votes than his or her opponent. But that candidate would still have the edge in the Electoral College.

It is important for candidates to campaign in all states, even ones with smaller populations and fewer electoral votes, in order to get a total of 270 electoral votes.



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- THE PRESIDENTIAL TICKET THAT GETS THE MOST CITIZENS' VOTES IN A STATE RECEIVES ALL THAT STATE'S ELECTORAL VOTES.



## Why do Americans keep the Electoral College?

It's in the Constitution, and it is very difficult to amend the Constitution. The Electoral College system also reinforces the two-party system, which means neither of the two major parties is likely to advocate a change.

**But there are other reasons for retaining the Electoral College.**

Many Americans like how the Electoral College system forces presidential candidates to campaign widely—even in smaller states whose residents might not otherwise have the chance to see candidates up close. And because presidential candidates cannot garner enough electoral votes by focusing on a single state or region, they learn about and address issues of interest to voters in all parts of the country. As a consequence, the Electoral College system influences how presidential campaigns are conducted, which has important implications for the cost of running a presidential campaign.